

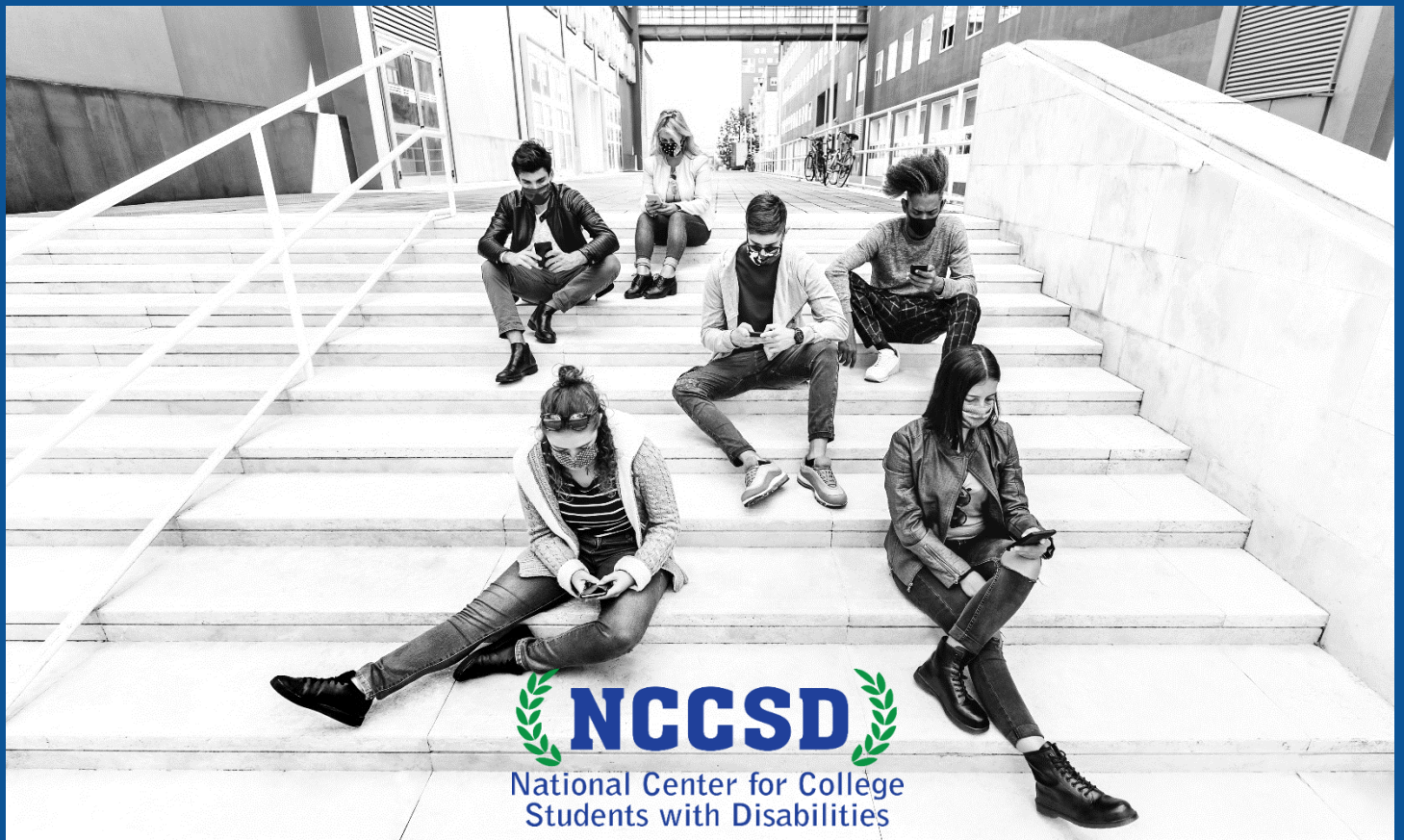
# NCCSD Research Brief

## Graduate and Professional Students with Disabilities: Obstacles to Degree Progress During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Cait S. Kirby, Krista M. Soria, & Susun Xiong

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National Center for College  
Students with Disabilities



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NCCSD research briefs provide information relevant to researchers and policymakers, on topics pertaining to college students with disabilities in the United States.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction .....	3
Methodology .....	3
Instrument .....	3
Sample .....	3
Measures .....	4
Data Analysis .....	4
Results.....	5
Discussion .....	9
Recommendations .....	11
References .....	12

## Abstract

The purpose of this research brief is to highlight the obstacles to degree progress experienced by graduate and professional students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. We used the gradSERU survey in our analysis, which was administered to over 15,000 graduate and professional students at ten large, public research universities from May to July 2020. In our sample, 28.6% of graduate and professional students had at least one disability.

We found that graduate and professional students with disabilities were more likely than their peers without disabilities to experience obstacles to their degree progress, including lack of access to appropriate study spaces, caregiving responsibilities, and the inability to conduct research. Graduate and professional students with one or more disabilities were more likely to report experiencing obstacles to degree progress than students with no disabilities. Students with more disabilities are more likely than students with no disabilities or one disability to indicate that they have experienced nearly every obstacle measured.

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## Introduction

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the operations of colleges and universities in the U.S., leading to closures of campus facilities, shifts to remote instruction for classes that were previously held in person, social distancing measures on campuses, and suspensions in traditional campus activities, such as student activities and research. In some cases, the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities for underrepresented and marginalized individuals, including undergraduates with disabilities, who are significantly more likely than students without disabilities to experience financial hardships, academic obstacles, and mental health ramifications during the pandemic (Horgos et al., 2020; Soria et al., 2020).

While researchers have published work about the experiences of undergraduate students with disabilities during the pandemic, at present, there is little known about the experiences of *graduate and professional students* with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the negative effects of the pandemic upon undergraduate students with disabilities, it is important to discover whether graduate and professional students with disabilities had significantly different experiences than their peers without disabilities during the pandemic.

The purpose of this research brief is to examine whether graduate and professional students with disabilities experienced significantly different obstacles to degree progress during the COVID-19 pandemic than graduate and professional students without disabilities. The obstacles to degree progress we explored in this research brief include the following:

- Inability to schedule qualifying events
- Inability to conduct research
- Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours
- Inadequate access to quality advising or faculty
- Lack of access to administrative services
- Increased teaching, research, or job workload
- Inability to attend professional conferences
- Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment
- Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member

## Methodology

### *Instrument*

From May to July, 2020, members of the Student Experience in the Research (SERU) Consortium administered a COVID-19 survey to graduate and professional students enrolled at ten large, public research universities in the United States. The SERU COVID-19 survey assessed several areas of the student experience for undergraduate, graduate, and professional students impacted by the pandemic. A copy of the survey is available [online](#).

### *Sample*

The institutions had average response rates between 14% and 41% and over 15,000 graduate and professional students responded to the survey. In the survey, students reported whether they had conditions or disabilities that significantly affected their academic experience. In our sample, 28.6% of students had at least one disability or condition (Table 1). Furthermore, 23.2% experienced one disability, 4.1% had two disabilities, and 0.7% had three or more disabilities. Additionally, 25% of students experienced emotional or mental health concerns or conditions, the most commonly-reported disability category.

Table 1

*Sample Demographic Information by Disability or Condition*

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Physical disability or condition (e.g., mobility limitation, sensory condition)	421	2.7
Learning disability or condition (e.g., dyslexia, speech disorder)	369	2.3
Neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability or condition (e.g., autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, brain injury)	762	4.8
Emotional or mental health concern or condition (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder)	3,973	25.0
Students with at least one disability	4,537	28.6
Students with no disabilities	11,348	71.4
Students with one disability	3,692	23.2
Students with two disabilities	715	4.1
Students with three or more disabilities	130	0.7
Students with no disabilities	11,348	71.4

**Measures**

For the items related to obstacles to degree progress, we asked students, “Which of the following factors, if any, have been an obstacle to your progress towards your graduate/professional degree during the COVID-19 pandemic? (Check all that apply)” and they could select any of the items that applied to them (thus constructing a yes/no response).

**Data Analysis**

We analyzed the data in three waves: first, we examined significant differences between graduate and professional students who had any disabilities compared to graduate and professional students without any disabilities. Next, we analyzed the differences between students based upon whether they had no disability, one disability, two disabilities, or three or more disabilities.

Finally, we analyzed the data by examining differences between 1) students who have a physical disability compared to students without a physical disability; 2) students who have a learning disability compared to students without a learning disability; 3) students who have a neurodevelopment or cognitive disability compared to students without a neurodevelopment or cognitive disability; and, 4) students with an emotional or mental health concern or condition compared to students without an emotional or mental health concern or condition. It is important to note that participants could select more than one type of disability. Additionally, those students without a specific type of disability may have one of the other types of disabilities and are not necessarily nondisabled.

All of the items we report in this research brief are categorical; therefore, we utilized Pearson’s chi-square test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies of students’ responses. We utilized the common probability level of  $p < .05$ , which serves as an a priori statement of the probability of an event occurring as extreme or more extreme than the one observed if the null hypothesis is true.



## Results

The results of our first analysis suggest that graduate and professional students with disabilities were significantly more likely than students without disabilities to experience each of the obstacles to degree progress (Table 2). Specifically, students with disabilities were more likely to experience lack of access to an appropriate study space or a distracting home environment. Nearly two thirds of students with disabilities reported experiencing this obstacle.

Additionally, the results suggest that graduate and professional students with disabilities were significantly more likely than students without disabilities to experience an inability to conduct research (50.5% compared to 39.9%). Students with disabilities were also significantly more likely to report needing to provide additional care for themselves or a family member (35.5% compared to 21.5% of students without disabilities).

Although the differences are smaller, graduate and professional students with disabilities were more likely to experience increased teaching and research workloads as compared to students without disabilities (22.5% compared to 14.0%). Graduate and professional students with disabilities were more likely than their peers without disabilities to report inadequate access to quality advising (20.4% compared to 12.8%), faculty (28.1% compared to 18.9%), and administrative services (13.6% compared to 8.9%).

Table 2

### *Differences in Obstacles to Degree Progress Experienced by Graduate/Professional Students*

	<i>Students With No Disability</i>		<i>Students With a Disability</i>		<i>Difference</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	5,359	47.8	2,877	64.0	16.2
Need to provide additional care for yourself or family	2,408	21.5	1,590	35.3	13.9
Inability to conduct research	4,481	39.9	2,273	50.5	10.6
Inability to attend professional conferences	3,695	32.9	1,908	42.4	9.5
Inadequate access to faculty	2,120	18.9	1,263	28.1	9.2
Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching	1,576	14.0	1,011	22.5	8.4
Inadequate access to quality advising	1,440	12.8	918	20.4	7.6
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	1,125	10.0	699	15.5	5.5
Lack of access to administrative services	998	8.9	610	13.6	4.7
Increased research workload	706	6.3	457	10.2	3.9
Inability to schedule qualifying events	1,282	11.4	636	14.1	2.7
Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours	1,422	12.7	657	14.6	1.9
Other, please specify	872	7.8	521	11.6	3.8
None of the above	1,612	14.4	252	5.6	-8.8

The results also suggest that students with multiple disabilities were more likely, on average, to experience obstacles to degree progress than their peers with no disabilities or their peers with only one disability (Table 3). In most cases, the differences between students with two disabilities, students with one disability, and students without a disability were statistically significant, suggesting that students who experience multiple disabilities fared worse with regard to obstacles to degree progress.

Similarly, a greater percentage of students who have three or more disabilities appear to have experienced obstacles to degree progress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to students without disabilities, students with three or more disabilities were more than twice as likely to experience needing to provide additional care for themselves or a family member, lack access to administrative services, faculty, and quality advising, as well as increased research workload. Additionally, compared to students without disabilities, students with three or more disabilities were *at least* 50% more likely to experience an increased teaching workload, increased hours works or obtained an additional job, inability to schedule qualifying events, as well as inability to attend professional conferences.

Table 3

*Differences in Obstacles to Degree Progress Experienced by Graduate/Professional Students*

	<i>Students With No Disability</i>		<i>Students With One Disability</i>		<i>Students With Two Disabilities</i>		<i>Students With Three or More Disabilities</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	5359	47.8	2289	62.5	496	70.1	92	70.8
Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member	2408	21.5	1216	33.2	308	43.5	66	50.8
Inability to conduct research	4481	39.9	1853	50.6	349	49.3	71	54.6
Inability to attend professional conferences	3695	32.9	1526	41.7	317	44.8	65	50.0
Inadequate access to faculty	2120	18.9	987	27.0	224	31.6	52	40.0
Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching	1576	14.0	818	22.3	158	22.3	35	26.9
Inadequate access to quality advising	1440	12.8	717	19.6	165	23.3	36	27.7
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	1125	10.0	538	14.7	137	19.4	24	18.5
Lack of access to administrative services	998	8.9	460	12.6	124	17.5	26	20.0
Increased research workload	706	6.3	369	10.1	70	9.9	18	13.8
Other, please specify	872	7.8	398	10.9	99	14.0	24	18.5
Inability to schedule qualifying events	1282	11.4	490	13.4	121	17.1	25	19.2
Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours	1422	12.7	526	14.4	111	15.7	20	15.4
None of the above	1612	14.4	214	5.8	32	4.5	6	4.6



When analyzing the data by type of disability, the results suggest graduate and professional students with a physical disability were significantly more likely than graduate and professional students without a physical disability to experience each of the obstacles to degree progress measured, except for the inability to fulfill required clinical rotations, residency, or internship hours (Table 4). Graduate and professional students with a physical disability were significantly less likely than their peers to indicate that they did not experience an obstacle to degree progress at all.

Additionally, the results suggest graduate and professional students with a learning disability were significantly more likely than students without a learning disability to experience most of the obstacles to degree progress, except for the inability to schedule qualifying events, inability to conduct research, increased research workload, and inability to attend professional conferences. Graduate and professional students with a learning disability were significantly less likely than their peers without learning disabilities to indicate that they did not experience any obstacle to degree progress at all.

Table 4

*Differences in Financial Hardships Experienced by Graduate and Professional Students*

	<i>Students With No Physical Disability</i>		<i>Students With a Physical Disability</i>		<i>Students With No Learning Disability</i>		<i>Students With a Learning Disability</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Inability to schedule qualifying events	1,844	12.0	74	17.8	1,864	12.1	54	14.8
Inability to conduct research	6,544	42.8	210	50.6	6,584	42.9	170	46.4
Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours	2,024	13.2	55	13.3	2,006	13.1	73	19.9
Inadequate access to quality advising	,2270	14.8	88	21.2	2,285	14.9	73	19.9
Inadequate access to faculty	3,253	21.3	130	31.3	3,288	21.4	95	26.0
Lack of access to administrative services	1,535	10.0	73	17.6	1,553	10.1	55	15.0
Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching	2,488	16.3	99	23.9	2,511	16.4	76	20.8
Increased research workload	1,116	7.3	47	11.3	1,127	7.3	36	9.8
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	1,748	11.4	76	18.3	1,768	11.5	56	15.3
Inability to attend professional conferences	5,427	35.5	176	42.4	5,459	35.6	144	39.3
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	7,994	52.2	242	58.3	8,006	52.1	230	62.8
Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member	3,817	24.9	181	43.6	3,845	25.0	153	41.8
Other, please specify	1,325	8.7	68	16.4	1,346	8.8	47	12.8
None of the above	1,835	12.0	29	7.0	1,839	12.0	25	6.8

The results also suggest graduate and professional students with a neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability were significantly more likely than students without a neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability to experience each of the obstacles to degree progress except for the inability to schedule qualifying events and the inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours (Table 5). Graduate and professional students with a neurodevelopmental or cognitive disability were significantly less likely than their peers to indicate that they did not experience any obstacle to degree progress at all.

Additionally, the results suggest graduate and professional students with an emotional or mental health concern or condition were significantly more likely than students without an emotional or mental health concern or condition to experience each of the measured obstacles to degree progress (Table 5). Graduate and professional students with an emotional or mental health concern or condition were significantly less likely than their peers without an emotional or mental health concern or condition to indicate that they did not experience any obstacles to degree progress.

Table 5

*Differences in Obstacles to Degree Progress Experienced by Graduate and Professional Students*

	<i>Students With No Neurodevelopmental or Cognitive Disability</i>		<i>Students With a Neurodevelopmental or Cognitive Disability</i>		<i>Students With No Emotional or Mental Health Concern or Condition</i>		<i>Students With a Emotional or Mental Health Concern or Condition</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Inability to schedule qualifying events	1,809	12.1	109	14.4	1,347	11.4	571	14.5
Inability to conduct research	6,383	42.7	371	48.9	4,737	40.2	2,017	51.2
Inability to fulfill required clinical rotation, residency, or internship hours	1,973	13.2	106	14.0	1,501	12.7	578	14.7
Inadequate access to quality advising	2,179	14.6	179	23.6	1,539	13.1	819	20.8
Inadequate access to faculty	3,151	21.1	232	30.6	2,244	19.0	1,139	28.9
Lack of access to administrative services	1,477	9.9	131	17.3	1,076	9.1	532	13.5
Increased teaching workload associated with transitioning to online teaching	2,417	16.2	170	22.4	1,690	14.3	897	22.8
Increased research workload	1,084	7.2	79	10.4	762	6.5	401	10.2
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	1,701	11.4	123	16.2	1,193	10.1	631	16.0
Inability to attend professional conferences	5,268	35.2	335	44.2	3,898	33.1	1,705	43.3
Lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment	7,714	51.6	522	68.9	5,665	48.1	2,571	65.3
Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member	3,713	24.8	285	37.6	2,581	21.9	1,417	36.0
Other, please specify	1,292	8.6	101	13.3	939	8.0	454	11.5
None of the above	1,823	12.2	41	5.4	1,661	14.1	203	5.2

In Table 6, we share the fold change in the likelihood of students with each type of disability to experience a selection of obstacles compared to students who do not have that type of disability. These obstacles include providing additional care for oneself or a family member, lack of access to administrative services, increased research workload, increased hours worked or obtained another job, and inadequate access to quality advising. For each of the selected obstacles, graduate and professional students with each of the types of disabilities were at least 30% more likely than their peers without that type of disability to report experiencing that obstacle (Table 6). In particular, graduate and professional students with disabilities were between 50% and 75% more likely than their peers without that type of disability to report experiencing that disability (Table 6).

Table 6

*Relative Differences in Obstacles to Degree Progress Experienced by Graduate and Professional Students, Selected Comparisons*

	<i>Students with a Physical Disability</i>	<i>Students With a Learning Disability</i>	<i>Students With a Neurodevelopmental or Cognitive Disability</i>	<i>Students With an Emotional or Mental Health Concern or Condition</i>
Need to provide additional care for yourself or a family member	1.75	1.67	1.52	1.64
Lack of access to administrative services	1.75	1.49	1.75	1.48
Increased research workload	1.55	1.34	1.44	1.57
Increased hours worked or obtained another job	1.60	1.33	1.43	1.58
Inadequate access to quality advising	1.43	1.34	1.62	1.59

## Discussion

Taken together, the results of our analysis suggest that graduate and professional students with disabilities were significantly more likely to experience obstacles to degree progress during the COVID-19 pandemic than students without disabilities.

Specifically, students with disabilities were significantly more likely than students without disabilities to experience lack of access to an appropriate study space or a distracting home environment, an inability to conduct research, needing to provide additional care for themselves or a family member, increased teaching and research workloads, as well as inadequate access to advising, faculty, and administrative services.

Students with more disabilities are more likely than students with fewer disabilities to indicate that they have experienced nearly every obstacle measured. Students with three or more disabilities were significantly more likely than students without disabilities to report obstacles related to time or workload balance.

Graduate and professional students with one or more disabilities were more likely to report experiencing obstacles to degree progress than students with no disabilities. Further, graduate

and professional students with multiple disabilities were more likely to report experiencing obstacles to degree progress than students with one or no disabilities.

While the data present compelling evidence against the disparities in students with and without disabilities during the pandemic, the limitations of the existing data leave readers with a number of unanswered questions that surface from these results.

Disabled graduate and professional students reported experiencing obstacles related to time or workload balance. We know from the results that disabled graduate and professional students faced additional personal or family care burdens at twice the rate of nondisabled graduate and professional students. Our study did not explore what care needs or what aspects of care were increased during this pandemic; for example, were these primarily mental-health concerns related to the experience of the pandemic? Were these additional physical care tasks that disabled students normally received from friends or family members to fulfill? Were these new care tasks because disabled students were unable to access healthcare during the isolation of the pandemic? Additional research should be conducted to understand the increased time burden encountered by students with disabilities.

Disabled graduate and professional students were almost twice as likely to experience an increase in teaching workload related to the online transition. It is possible that the transition to online learning was inaccessible to many disabled graduate and professional students and that disabled students spent time making materials accessible to themselves so that they could then interact with students. Or it may be the case that teaching assistants with disabilities needed more time to learn new technologies necessary for online learning. Further, the very quick and unexpected pivot from online to virtual learning altered many course plans and syllabi, condensing material, and shortening turnaround times for grading, which may have been an especially challenging adjustment for professional and graduate students with disabilities. We encourage further examination of this issue to provide insights into the gap in disabled and nondisabled graduate and professional students' teaching workload during the pandemic.

Given that all disabled students—and especially graduate and professional students with multiple disabilities—reported experiencing obstacles to degree progress at a higher rate than students without disabilities, we do not know why disabled graduate and professional students reported a lack of access to resources and services at more than twice the rate of students without disabilities. It is possible that students with disabilities had a difficult time communicating with these offices virtually due to inaccessibility, or the additional burden of reaching out virtually. It is also possible that students with disabilities adjusted their schedules to better fit their needs, but did not match the schedules of the faculty and administrators.

It may be the case that disabled graduate and professional students had higher resource needs, and thus were more impacted by pivoting to a virtual environment. Alternatively, it is possible that faculty and administrators who previously reached out to students who appeared to need assistance were either unaware of the students' needs due to a lack of interaction or unable to reach out to students due to additional burdens on the faculty and administrators' own time during the pandemic. Additional work should be done to understand what access to resources would have been useful to disabled students.

Finally, it does not appear that there are large differences in students' reported obstacles to degree progress by type of disability (e.g., physical disability). Overall, students who had any type of disability were more likely to experience obstacles to degree progress compared to their peers without disabilities.

## Recommendations

Overall, we recommend that higher education professionals, including disability support staff, counselors, academic advisors, program coordinators, and department chairs consider the obstacles to degree progress that disabled graduate and professional students experience.

For instance, we found that disabled graduate and professional students were more likely to struggle with accessing faculty and staff than their nondisabled peers. We suggest that staff, administrators, and faculty work together with disabled professional and graduate students to plan a proactive strategy for promoting communication. This strategy might include staff, administrators, and faculty reach out directly to students with some frequency. Disability resource centers can reach out to students registered with their office to check in about support needs or to connect students with faculty and staff resources. Disability resource centers can also help faculty and staff consider multiple or alternate means of communication to meet a variety of communication needs. These strategies might include scheduling frequent meetings with students, meeting as a group with other students, and discussing strategies for communication that work for students.

Given that disabled graduate and professional students were more likely to spend more time caring for themselves or a family member during the COVID-19 pandemic, we recommend that disability resource centers collect and share information about resources to help students, both on and off campus. The additional caregiving time could serve as an obstacle to degree progress and providing additional resources for disabled students could increase student success, while also maintaining (instead of extending) the current length of time to obtain a degree.

Additionally, given that disabled students were more likely to spend more time on research and teaching, experienced an increase in caring needs, and increased their work hours, we conclude that the support needs of disabled students likely changed significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. While accommodations can be altered throughout the semester, students are sometimes unaware of accommodations or may have a difficult time getting new accommodation documentation and materials from their doctors in the middle of a semester. Those challenges, in addition to financial hardships experienced by graduate and professional students with disabilities during the pandemic (Soria et al., 2021), added to the burdens already experienced by students with disabilities. Therefore, we recommend that staff who work to provide accommodations and support for disabled students reach out to students to inquire about their accommodations at very regular intervals. In these conversations, staff should remind students that accommodations are variable and can be changed and updated as needed.

In conclusion, the results of our study suggest that graduate and professional students with disabilities were more likely to experience financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to graduate and professional students without disabilities. We recommend that disability support resource staff, counselors, faculty, and academic advisors offer wraparound care for students with disabilities as they help them navigate the financial uncertainties and challenges during the global pandemic.

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